

Centre County has the whole nine yards Penn State, festivals, recreation, history

July 5, 2015

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State College recently was ranked as the 14th best town in which to live in the country, in part, because of the wide variety of fun things to do. Of course, visitors can partake in those fun things, too, from festivals throughout the year, to events on the Penn State campus to historical and recreational attractions and activities throughout Centre County.

"Tour. Roar. Explore ... More!" is the trademark slogan for the Central Pennsylvania Convention & Visitors Bureau, reflecting among other things, the love for all things Nittany Lions.

Where do you start with Penn State?

Article Photos



Courtesy photo Penn State?University

Berkey Creamery, the largest university creamery in the nation, is celebrating 150 years at University Park.

"You start with the Creamery," CPCVB Executive Director Betsey Howell said, referring to the Berkey Creamery that is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year. Just 10 years younger than the university itself, it is the largest university creamery in the nation and is known for its famous ice cream, sherbet and cheeses.

Pair a visit to the creamery with a stroll through the nearby Penn State Arboretum. It's free and open from dawn to dusk. Features include an oasis garden and lotus pool; an impressive Ridge and Valley Sculpture; a rose garden; and, the Children's Garden with a cave and an outdoor room made of woven bamboo with natural objects for children to explore.

It also is home to rows of vegetables and herbs, a marsh meadow, a fountain, an orchard, a huge sundial and an overlook pavillion. You could easily spend two hours here.

"The Arboretum is an absolutely beautiful place," Howell said.

Also nearby is the Palmer Museum of Art, where "Flora and Fauna" is on display through Aug. 16.

Howell recommends that visitors consider taking a campus tour via the Vamos! Lion Chariot pedicab.

"It is a most enjoyable ride," she said. "He does this tour through campus, explaining the history. It's wonderful."

Regular events include plenty of cultural offerings at the Center for Performing Arts, and the Bryce Jordan Center brings in big-name acts often, never mind hosting Penn State sports teams. The Pegula Ice Arena hosts hockey games, as well as serves as a community rink.

The School of Music offers concerts and recitals, and the Penn State All-Sports Museum is housed in Beaver Stadium, which is rocking during home football games in the fall.

Thousands of people flood campus and hundreds of RVs line up to take tailgating to an extreme level - and demonstrate how Happy Valley got its name.

"There are so many things to do on campus," Howell said.

Festivals galore

Perhaps the largest arts festival around is the Central Pennsylvania Festival of the Arts, which will be this week from Wednesday through Sunday in downtown State College and on the PSU campus. At least 125,000 people are expected to attend the affair that will have hundreds of artists and their works, 50 performers and so much more.

Howell said three other large events are happening this week, as well: Peoples Choice Festival in Boalsburg, Heritage Days in Philipsburg and the Remington Ryde bluegrass festival at the Grange Fairgrounds in Centre Hall.

"They're all multi-day events," Howell said. "People just go to everything. They're all a little different and this gives people a lot of things to do."

State College also is home to First Night every New Year's Eve and Fourth Fest in July with fireworks and - for the first time this year - a concert, said Howell.

Penn State will host its annual Ag Progress Days in August with farming, food and cooking demonstrations, as well as fun things for children, including a pedal go-kart derby. Hundreds of exhibits include showcases of the latest Penn State research.

"It's always a fun time," Howell said of Pennsylvania's largest outdoor agricultural exposition.

Also in August is the 141st Centre County Grange Fair at the fairgrounds in Centre Hall.

"It's the last encampment fair in the country," Howell said.

Several thousand campers in tents and RVs - as well as daytrippers - enjoy more than 7,000 exhibit items, amusement rides, livestock, horse shows, a tractor pull and top-name entertainment, which this year will include Sammy Kershaw, as well as former winners of The Voice Craig Wayne Boyd and Cassadee Pope.

Countywide, residents celebrate their local restaurants and food with the Happy Valley Culinary Week, just held in June for the third time. And, the new Central PA Tasting Trail was launched last year and features 13 sites, including three wineries, four breweries, two distilleries and two cideries.

Offerings from the community-owned State Theatre in State College range from rock 'n' roll to drama to musical theater and comedy.

Outside activities are plentiful in the region, particularly during the warmer months.

Howell said the area is becoming well known for biking - two races are held annually - and angling is popular in Spring, Penn's and Spruce creeks.

"We have some of the best fly fishing in the country," she said.

Centre County is home to Bald Eagle and Black Moshannon state parks and activities ranging from hiking to swimming, to boating and more. The Nature Inn at Bald Eagle "is one of the most relaxing places," according to Howell.

History

In the center of the county seat of Bellefonte is Talleyrand Park, a quaint square next to the Big Spring that gushes 13 million gallons a day and serves as the town's water supply.

It is where most of the Bellefonte's festivals are held, including a fall festival, a Victorian Christmas event and a major arts and crafts fair.

Founded in 1805 - five years after the county was carved out of Huntingdon, Lycoming, Mifflin and Northumberland counties - Bellefonte remains proud of its history and features in the charming Talleyrand a monument to the seven governors who once resided there.

The park is next to an historic railroad line, used today for excursion rides as well as by a short-line railroad company.

Across the tracks is the historic Match Factory building that has been restored by the American Philatelic Society, which houses its national headquarters and a stamp library there.

In the heart of downtown Bellefonte is the courthouse originally constructed in 1805 and on the National Register of Historic Places today. Out front is The Soldiers and Sailors War Memorial and statue of Andrew Gregg Curtin, a native of Bellefonte who served as governor during the Civil War.

Just down Allegheny Street is the Bellefonte Art Museum. There, the work of watercolorist Brienne Brown is on exhibit through July 26, along with a semi-permanent exhibit on Anna Wagner Keichline, an architect, inventor, suffragist and military intelligence agent who was born in Bellefonte.

Just north of Bellefonte is Milesburg, where the Curtin Village at Eagle Ironworks is located. The village was part of a large iron-works plantation founded by Andrew Curtin's father, Roland, and operated by the family from 1810 to 1921. The buildings and grounds, including the waterwheel-powered Pleasant Furnace, the family mansion built in 1830 and period furnishings, are preserved to provide a look into a company town in the 1800s.

Another historical site owing to the iron industry is the Centre Furnace Mansion in State College, where Penn State actually got started. It was the home of Centre Furnace ironmaster Moses Thompson and his family from 1842-1891, and today houses the Centre County Historical Society and its museum.

Boalsburg is home to a lot of historical artifacts, and its name stems from the Boal family that settled in the area 200 years ago. One Boal married a descendant of Christopher Columbus and brought the Columbus Chapel to the Boal Mansion from Spain in 1909.

Other artifacts owned by the 15th century explorer are in the chapel on the mansion grounds, both of which are open to the public.

Just down the road from the mansion is the Pennsylvania Military Museum which honors veterans dating to the Spanish-American War.

Up the mountain near Centre Hall is Penn's Cave, the only all-water cavern in the country that can be toured only by boat. One recent Sunday, a tour guide provided a history of the area, including the legend of Native American princess, Nita-Nee, which led to the naming of a nearby mountain as Nittany and ultimately the creation of the Penn State mascot, the fabled Nittany Lion.

It is cool in the caves - the guide said they are a constant 52 degrees - so bring a jacket, and wear good shoes. The climb to and from the mouth of the cave is rather steep, includes stairs, and is not handicapped-accessible. The Penn's Cave and House are on the National Register of Historic Places, having opened as a commercial showplace in 1885.

Up another mountain in Philipsburg is the historic Union Church and Burial Grounds, informally known as Mud Church. The congregation was founded in 1820 and the building was extensively rebuilt as a Gothic style Anglican church in 1842.

"There truly are some hidden gems" all over the county, Howell said.

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